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**Set Boundaries, Find Peace:
A Guide to Reclaiming Yourself**

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How many of you have read the classic children's book *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein. It was published almost sixty years ago, in 1964. It's a classic tale of a tree and a boy. Many of you will remember how the story goes. When the child was little, he would visit the tree every day, play in her leaves, climb up her trunk, swing from her branches, eat her apples, and sleep in her shade. And both the boy and the tree were happy.

As the boy grew into a man, the relationship became less mutual. He narcissistically stops visiting the tree except when he needs something, and when he does, the codependent tree just keeps giving until there's nothing left to give.

First, the boy takes the tree's *apples* to sell, then he takes the tree's *branches* to build a house, and then he takes the tree's *trunk* to build a boat. And when only a *stump* remains, the tree offers that to the boy as a seat. The original story ends with the lines: "Come, Boy, sit down. Sit down and rest." And the boy did. And the tree was happy."

But was the tree really happy? Or is this famous children's story just gaslighting us? Are we just going to sweep under the rug all those years between the boy's visits when the tree was sad?

Perhaps this story should be retitled, "The Giving Tree and the Taking Man." Or better yet: do we even *need* a better ending? Well, good news: a few years ago the writer Topher Payne did just that. For the uninitiated, allow me to introduce you to the story of The Tree Who Set Healthy Boundaries. Note that on the top lefthand corner of the cover, the tree is telling the little boy a word never heard in the original version: the word *no*.

Let's pick up our story as the boy is growing older and only visiting the tree when he wants something.

"I am too busy to climb trees," said the [man].

"I want a house to keep me warm...."

"I want a wife and I want children, and so I need a house. Can you give me a house?"

And the tree said—"Okay, hold up. This is already getting out of hand."

"Look, [the tree said] I was fine with giving you the apples to help you get on your feet. They'll grow back next season anyway.

But no, I'm not giving you a *house*.

You know, I've seen boys like you pull this nonsense with other trees in the forest. First it's the apples, then branches, then the trunk, and before you know it that mighty beautiful tree is just a sad little stump. Well, look here, Boy, I love you like family, *But I am not going down like that.*"

"And while we're on the subject, the tree said, grabbing him by the collar of his shirt. "I recognize friendships evolve over time, And we may not see each other as often because you don't have time for your tree friends. But we used to be real tight. Now it feels like I only see you when you need something. How do you think that makes me feel?"

The [Man] took a long breath. He felt a sour rumble in his stomach.

Because he realized he hadn't considered his friend's feelings. "I bet it makes you feel [sad]," said the [Man].

"Yes...[sad]. I can't even remember the last time you asked me how I'm doing."

"How are you, tree?" asked the [Man]. He sincerely wanted to know.

So the tree told the [Man] all the gossip from the forest, and introduced him to the family of red squirrels that had moved into her trunk. While she was glad for the company the squirrels provided, she was concerned about the long-term health effects Of hosting a burrow. So the [Man] called the local arborist, who explained that squirrels don't eat wood, they only build nests in pre-existing holes, so the tree was in no danger.

The tree was so relieved. And so was the [Man]. He loved his friend and was concerned about her long-term health because she had taught him the importance of empathy.

And so it continued, the tree and the [Man] looking out for each other like that— Both of them content in the knowledge that someone had their back. The [Man] attended culinary school. The tree took courses

online and got her certification in small business management. They did their homework together nearly every day.

The [Man] became a pastry chef. Together, they opened a bakery selling the best apple pies anyone had ever tasted. It turned a profit in the first eighteen months, which is most uncommon.

Eventually...the [Man] had a son of his own.

And much later, the son of the [Man] had his own family too.

Because of their friendship, the [Man] was successful and fulfilled, and the tree grew wider and stronger, standing tall and beautiful in the forest for many, many, many years. Plus a few years even more than that.

And as each generation played in her strong old branches, the tree often thought back to the fateful day when the [Man] had asked her for a house. In truth, she would have gladly given him her branches to build one. She would have given him her trunk to build a boat. She loved him that much.

But then she would have had nothing left. Not for herself, nor for anyone else. And there never would have been a home for the red squirrels.

'There'd have been no hide and seek with the [Man's] grandchildren.

No bakery with the best apple pies anyone ever tasted!

Setting healthy boundaries is a very important part of giving.

It assures you'll always have something left to give. And so the tree was happy. Everyone was. The End.

So what do you think? Is that a happier ending? At least in my view it very much is. But as I suspect you know from your own experience, both *setting* boundaries and *holding* boundaries are often easier said than done when the complexities of life come into play.

So if you or someone you love could use some help setting and holding boundaries, allow me to introduce you to Nedra Glover Tawwab. She's a therapist, social worker, and writer.

My favorite book by her was published a few years ago and is titled *Set Boundaries, Find Peace: A Guide to Reclaiming Yourself*. That short and accessible book is a great place to start if this sermon leaves you curious to learn more.

There is also a *Set Boundaries Workbook* to help you put the lessons from her first book into action — and just this year she published a second book, which is also good, titled *Drama Free: A Guide to Managing Unhealthy Family Relationships*. And you can give your future self a gift if you want to pre-order her *Set Boundaries Card Deck*, which is coming soon.

So there are lots of boundary-setting tools available. But I would encourage you not to get overwhelmed. Focusing on just her first book is a great place to start.

And if you don't have time for any of that, I'm a big fan of her Instagram feed: [instagram.com/nedratawwab](https://www.instagram.com/nedratawwab). It's free and you could get a lot of benefit from taking a few minutes to scroll through her archive of posts.

Indeed, part of what helped skyrocket her career was the time one of her Instagram posts went viral. It was titled "Signs That You Need Boundaries." As I read

these warning signs, notice if you identify in particular with one of more of these in this season of your life:

- You feel overwhelmed.
- You feel resentment toward people for asking for your help.
- You avoid phone calls and interactions with people you think might ask for something.
- You make comments about helping people and getting nothing in return.
- You feel burned out.
- You frequently daydream about dropping everything and disappearing.
- You have no time for yourself. (xv)

The first step, as they say, is admitting you have a problem!

So let's get into the specifics a little more. Just what are boundaries anyway? Tawwab's definition is that, "Boundaries are expectations and needs that help you feel safe and comfortable in your relationship (5)." Is that so unreasonable? Being forthright and transparent about what you need to be safe and comfortable in your relationships? As we've already seen, the corollary is that *not* having boundaries can directly contribute to feeling overwhelmed, resentful, avoidant, and burned out in relationships.

My favorite definition of boundaries comes from the therapist, activist, and writer Prentis Hemphill: "Boundaries are the distance at which I can love you and me simultaneously" ([Brown](#) 129). That's a profound point. Me loving you matters, but so does *me loving me* — and that last part too easily gets dropped or rolled over. If I consistently defer to your preferences in most circumstances (or if you usually do the same for me in most situation) our relationship can end up in a Giving Tree situation in

which one of us gives and gives and gives and the other takes and takes and takes until only a stump of a relationship remains. Boundaries are reminders that we *both* matter. “Boundaries are the distance at which I can love you and me simultaneously.”

Tawwab has identified two core steps in setting boundaries:

1. **Communication:** Other people cannot read your mind and heart. To set a boundary, you need to “explicitly state what you expect” succinctly and clearly.
2. **Action:** If your boundaries are frequently violated, you need to restate your boundaries and hold them gently but firmly.

For example, if you have a friend who regularly creates chaos in your life by changing plans at the last minute, you might set a boundary that you need to know of changes by the day before in order to change plans. If your friend then still texts you an hour before with a requested change, holding your boundary can sound like: “I want to hang out with you, but my life won’t allow for last-minute adjustments. I need to know about changes to plans at least a day before. Let’s set up a time to get together next week”. That is, restate the boundary and hold to it — gently and compassionately, but firmly.

I also appreciate Tawwab’s top three tips to *avoid* when setting boundaries. The first one is a biggie and an easy error to make. She emphasizes:

1. “Never, Ever, *Ever* Apologize.” For both you and the person you are setting a boundary with, apologizing reinforces the misconception that it’s wrong or selfish to take your needs into account. There is no reason to apologize for trying to be healthy and avoid becoming “The Giving Tree” who gives until only a stump remains (114).

2. “Don’t Waver.” Said more positively: hold the boundary *every time*. If you let someone transgress your boundary even once, it can easily set a precedent that can lead to many future boundary violations. But be gentle.
3. “Don’t Say Too Much.” Phrased more positively: be succinct and repeat your original clear, concise boundary as much as possible. If it feels ok to you, it’s fine to respond to a few questions about why you have set your boundary, but you don’t have to. Healthy people will respect that your boundary is what you need at this time (115).

That last point is especially important: how someone responds to your boundary is really important data. By and large, *healthier* people will respect that your boundary is what you need at this time without much pushback (21). In contrast, people who are *less healthy* will often be less respectful of your boundary and push back more (21-22). In other words, when someone gives you a lot of pushback on a boundary, you may want to think to yourself, “Wow. This person just confirmed for me that I was really wise to set a boundary. And I really need to be intentional about holding boundaries around them.”

There are a lot of strategies in Tawwab’s book for dealing with people who challenge your boundaries. I’ll limit myself to sharing just three quick examples of responses you might use if someone pushes back on a boundary you have set:

1. “Call it out.” Say something like, “Are you trying to make me feel bad about [asking for what I need]?”
2. “Make the conversation about *you*, not them.” Say something like, “It’s nothing personal. This is just what I have found that I need.”

3. “Declare that you’ve made your decision.” Say something like “Your response seems like you’re trying to change my mind” (87).

If you find that saying any of that — or setting and holding boundaries generally — is really difficult for you or bringing up a lot of guilt, shame, or fear, reading Tawwab’s book could help. If you are still feeling a lot of strong emotions around boundaries even after reading the book, I am serious when I say I have a list of therapist referrals available upon request. It can really help to have an expert help you unpack what boundaries (or the lack thereof) looked like in your family of origin. What are some of your earliest memories around boundaries being transgressed or dishonored, and more (65-66)? The goal of such therapeutic work is to get a lot more free and liberated around setting the boundaries you need in order to have a life in which you are more peaceful and at ease — and feel safer and more comfortable in your relationships.

For now, I’ll move toward my conclusion with the two most common mistakes I’ve found in my own ongoing experiments with setting and holding boundaries. The first most common mistake I’ve seen is that it can be easy to go too far and become *too rigid* with boundaries. There is some great material in Tawwab’s book about avoiding boundaries that are either way too porous or too rigid — and working your way toward a “Goldilocks Zone” of healthy boundaries *just right* for loving both yourself and others (10-12).

The other most common mistake I’ve seen with setting and holding boundaries is thinking that your boundaries are going to change or control others. For instance, that hypothetical friend who always wants to change plans at the last minute may keep

asking to make last minute changes. That may not change, but you can change your own personal willingness to refuse those last-minute changes.

Boundaries work best when you focus on what *you need* and what *you can change* to love both yourself and others. You can't ultimately control what other people do, but you can adjust your boundaries accordingly around what you are and aren't willing to do or be around.

There is also much more in the book about setting *physical* boundaries (when you do and do not consent to be touched, including hugging and handshaking), boundaries around your *time*, boundaries around *holidays, relationships, family, social media*, and more. So I encourage you to dive deeper into Nedra Tawwab's work if you are curious to learn more.

It's September, arguably an even better time than January for making changes to your life. With fall approaching, what do you feel led to *let go of*? What do you need to set boundaries around so that you are better able to love both yourself and others? You're worth it. As our UU First Principle reminds us, *you* have "inherent worth and dignity." You deserve to love and respect yourself just as much as others deserve your love and respect.